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SUBJECT: NO SURPRISES IN RUSSIA'S "SUPER SUNDAY" REGIONAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine. For reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In regional legislative elections in eight of Russia's regions on March 12, the pro-Kremlin United Russia party appears to have scored a clear victory. Four political parties ran in all eight elections, while Rodina and some smaller parties were kept off the ballot in some of those regions. Preliminary reports indicate that voter turnout was low, with a significant "against all" vote. The administration's active role in removing parties from the electoral races and its use of administrative resources indicate its continued efforts to limit opposition gains and control the membership of regional legislatures, which recently have been granted the right to nominate governors.
END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (U) On March 12 regional legislative elections took place in the Adygeya and Altay Republics, the Kaliningrad, Kursk, Kirov, Nizhniy Novgorod, and Orenburg Oblasts, and Khanty-Mansy Autonomous Okrug. Two State Duma by-elections were also held, as were local self-government elections in 60 regions. This "super Sunday" of regional races resulted from last year's amendment to federal election legislation consolidating regional and municipal elections to two voting days, the second Sunday in March and the second Sunday in October. Most regions require 20-25 percent voter turnout in order to validate an election, and parties must exceed a 5-7 percent threshold (depending on the region) to gain representation in a regional legislature. Only four parties, United Russia (YR), the Communist Party (KPRF), the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDPR), and the Russian Party of Pensioners, succeeded in registering for all eight legislative elections.

¶3. (SBU) Regional legislative races long drew minimal attention, given that governors were directly elected and usually controlled their legislatures. With the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections, however, those legislatures gained the power to vote on whether to approve of the president's gubernatorial nomination, giving the regional legislative races more at least formal significance. The latest change, giving regional legislatures the power to nominate governors, further enhances the significance, or at least the profile, of the regional races.

RESULTS

¶4. (U) According to preliminary results from the elections, United Russia (YR) received a plurality of votes in all eight regions where legislative races were held, with results ranging from a high of 58 percent in Khanty-Mansy Autonomous Okrug to a low of 27 percent in Altay Republic. KPRF placed

a strong second in six of the eight regions, receiving between 11 and 18 percent of the vote. LDPR passed the voting threshold in five of the eight regions. The Party of Pensioners, although competing in all eight regions, passed the threshold in only three of them. The Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Yabloko failed to pass the threshold in any of the regions. The "against all" option was widely used, garnering 13 percent in Khanty-Mansy Autonomous Okrug and over eight percent in Orenburg Oblast. Rodina was kept off the ballot in all but one of the races; in Altay Republic it captured over ten percent of the vote, finishing second after YR.

¶ 15. (U) Aleksandr Veshnyakov, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC), announced the results at a March 13 press conference, stating that despite the "convincing victory" of YR, all regional legislatures would have representation of three to six parties. This, Veshnyakov argued, precluded the emergence of a one-party political system in Russia.

UNITED RUSSIA'S SUCCESS

¶ 16. (C) Preliminary results demonstrated YR's continuing strength as the country's ruling party. One of the biggest complaints by smaller parties against YR was its widespread use of "administrative resources" in the regions. Many YR party lists in the regions were headed by governors, who could throw the resources at their disposal behind YR candidates to more effectively gather financing and advertise. In Kaliningrad Oblast, for instance, Consulate St. Petersburg noted that Governor Georgiy Boos exerted considerable influence during election preparations to ensure

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a YR victory and to prevent Kremlin-unfriendly figures from winning seats. Lilya Shibanova of the Golos election monitoring organization told us that she expects YR to continue to strengthen during this year's regional elections.

As more YR candidates succeed in reaching the regional legislatures, no strong opposition will be able to develop, Shibanova predicted.

RODINA AND OTHERS REMOVED FROM BALLOTS

¶ 17. (C) Perhaps the most noteworthy development of this set of elections was regional election commissions' refusal to register parties that the Kremlin appeared to see as a potential threat. Most strikingly, regional election commissions banned Rodina in 7 out of 8 of the legislative elections. The only exception came in Altay, where Rodina successfully appealed the electoral commission's decision and was reinstalled on the ballot. Regional election commissions removed parties based on alleged violations, such as campaigning before the designated start date and technical violations on signature lists. Rodina was not the only target of the election commissions, with several commissions removing a record number of parties. Nizhniy Novgorod's commission disallowed six parties, while Adygeya disallowed four.

¶ 18. (C) Rodina's absence from almost all of the May 12 races led many observers to note that the Kremlin is showing its dissatisfaction with Dmitriy Rogozin, the party's leader. Moscow Carnegie Center analyst Nikolay Petrov told us that although initially created to help the Kremlin, Rodina had become too independent and popular. Rogozin began to express his own views, rather than those scripted by the Kremlin. The Kremlin needed an "opposition" party that it could control. Many believe that if Rodina replaces Rogozin at its March 25 party congress, it will have a chance to regain the Kremlin's favor. Likewise, Consulate St. Petersburg noted to us that the People's Party in Kaliningrad was not allowed on the ballot, likely due to its party leader, Igor Rudnikov,

who had boosted his party's popularity in the oblast to 15 percent while ignoring the regional administration and the Kremlin.

KPRF AND LDPR

¶ 9. (C) Some observers had predicted that KPRF and LDPR would receive the benefits of Rodina's absence from the ballot. Indeed, the Communists took a strong second to YR in several of the March 12 races. Maksim Dianov of the Institute of Regional Problems suggested that the new schedule of regional elections would also help those two parties. On the one hand, he argued, it would gradually funnel "Presidential opposition" into the KPRF camp. It was also a gift to LDPR, in Dianov's view, likely boosting that party close to or over the voting threshold in many regions by allowing it to pick up votes that would otherwise have gone to Rodina. LDPR did manage to gain representation in at least five regional legislatures in the March 12 races, although it is too early to tell the extent to which Rodina's exclusion affected the outcome.

FATE OF DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

¶ 10. (C) The March 12 races were also closely watched with regard to the democratic parties, particularly given the relatively successful alliance of SPS and Yabloko in the December Moscow election. While neither SPS nor Yabloko met the voting threshold in any of the regional elections, their decision to split the regions up - only running against one another in one region in order not to harm each other's chances - signaled increased coordination. Petrov commented to us that the democrats had demonstrated pragmatism, which he saw as an encouraging sign. Shibanova, however, told us the democrats still did not look strong enough to effectively compete in the 2007 parliamentary elections.

LOW TURNOUT SIGNIFICANT?

¶ 11. (C) To many observers, the low turnout and the relatively high percentage of "against all" votes (which, according to press reports, averaged 10 percent in the eight regions) suggest continued voter dissatisfaction. The absence of Rodina may have enhanced that unhappiness. Consulate Yekaterinburg noted that in Khanty-Mansy Autonomous Okrug, the "against all" option garnered over 13 percent, putting it in second place behind YR. Petrov predicted that voter disappointment, reflected in the high "against all" vote on

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March 12, could eventually translate into some form of social protest. According to Petrov, local electoral commissions never before played such an active role in eliminating parties from the ballot, and that result in a backlash among voters.

COMMENT

¶ 12. (C) The March 12 elections produced no surprises and consolidated United Russia's control of regional legislatures. Prior elections had featured other forms of "administrative resources." This time around, to an unprecedented extent they took the form of regional election commissions eliminating parties perceived as unfriendly to the Kremlin from running, with Rodina being the hardest hit. That may have evoked some popular discontent, but if the Kremlin saw regional elections as a trial run for the 2007-08 national election cycle, it must be generally satisfied with the results.

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